

Are We All Cosmopolitans Now? A Reply to Costa

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The idea of cultural cosmopolitanism has been developed by Jeremy Waldron in a series of essays over the last decade or so. Although Waldron has touched lightly on educational themes in several of these, his focus has been on the cultural constitution of individual identities and how the claims he wants to make about that process create trouble for liberal nationalists, such as Will Kymlicka or Charles Taylor. The bearing these claims might have on educational policy has been at best a peripheral concern. Victoria Costa's essay is thus welcome as a lucid and thoughtful exploration of some uncharted civic educational implications of Waldron's influential argument.

Following Samuel Scheffler, Costa differentiates strong and moderate versions of cultural cosmopolitanism, concepts between which Waldron allegedly tends to vacillate. Moderate cosmopolitans give us what Scheffler calls "traditionalism with a cosmopolitan inflection."¹ Moderate cosmopolitans know that attempts to recover the cultural purity their communities supposedly had in some past Golden Age is delusional. Mutual borrowing and adaptation across cultural boundaries is as much a part of the human condition as fidelity to established custom. The idea that once upon a time our ancestral cultures flourished in innocent isolation from each other belies the mutual influence that migration, trade, and warfare have always exerted on human beings. Alternatively, strong cosmopolitans not only accept the truth of this: they exult in the cultural hybridity and impurity that their moderate counterparts merely acknowledge. They are akin to the exponents of individuality whom Mill celebrated in *On Liberty*: impatient with social stasis, adventurous in their construction of a self from varied cultural materials, and heedless of all those who would insist on close conformity with customary patterns of life.

Costa claims that no civic argument for a public education that encourages strong cosmopolitanism is tenable from the standpoint of liberal pluralism. Strong cosmopolitanism is an elective ideal, so to speak, that citizens should be free to embrace or reject at their discretion. In this respect, it resembles models of religious self-perfection, for example, that the liberal state should protect but not promote. Moderate cosmopolitanism, on the other hand, is a mandatory educational end because it is integral to the mutual respect and understanding on which the stability of a free society depends. Costa does not work out that relationship in any detail, although I think its broad outlines are easily discerned. Moderate cosmopolitanism may not always be strictly necessary for civic respect, and it is certainly never sufficient. But it is plausible to think of it as a solvent for some particularly noxious varieties of nationalism or tribalism that enjoin cultural purification or which propagate hateful falsehoods about whatever or whomever they deem repugnant.

Costa's argument seems to me substantially correct. But I do not see that cultural cosmopolitanism is at odds with communitarianism, multiculturalism, and

liberal nationalism in the way that Waldron, and perhaps Costa,² seem to think. Costa says that cultural cosmopolitanism subverts these sundry political conceptions by refuting an assumption on which they rest: “that there is a *basic human need* for a unified cultural framework.” I assume here that “unified” in the phrase “unified culture” functions as an antonym of “diversified” or “mixed”, which is the only sense in which moderate cosmopolitanism requires that our cultural framework not be unified. “Unified” might also mean something like “coherent” or “stable.” But no credible argument for cosmopolitanism could require that we make our cultures incoherent and unstable. That being so, I think that what moderate cultural cosmopolitanism shows is not so much that there is no basic human need for a unified cultural framework in the sense that contrasts with a diversified framework but, more radically, that *there is no such thing* as a framework of that kind. The formation of any society’s cultural framework is too deeply implicated in intercultural exchange of one sort or another for that to be a real human possibility. For their part, strong cultural cosmopolitans will certainly deny that there is a basic human need for a unified cultural framework to our lives. On the contrary, they will say that a cultural framework well-adapted to our flourishing will be as diversified as possible because only then can we enjoy the range of creative materials that enable us to live as we should.

However, as Costa has successfully shown, strong cosmopolitanism is irrelevant to the content of civic education, except as one elective personal ideal among others that a free society will properly respect. The question then is what damage we do to communitarianism, multiculturalism, and liberal nationalism once we take to heart the message of moderate cosmopolitanism on the impossibility of a unified culture. The answer is: nothing.

Communitarianism is an internally diverse category, and this is hardly the place to explore its complexities. But members of the category who deny the truth in moderate cosmopolitanism would appear to be elusive. As the (putative) communitarian theorist most vehement in his disdain for liberal pluralism, Alasdair MacIntyre might at first glance seem to be a promising candidate for what we are seeking. But MacIntyre is far too sanguine about the possibility and value of dialogue across rival traditions and far too sensitive to the way in which successful traditions build on the successes and failures of their predecessors for him to be charitably understood as anything other than what Scheffler would call a traditionalist with a “cosmopolitan inflection.”³

Multiculturalism is another disparate and disputatious family of normative political conceptions. Once again, finding a real example that is undermined by moderate cosmopolitanism is an uphill task. In fact, it might even be an incoherent task. I assume that arguing for a multicultural conception of the good and just society, whatever else it might entail, must be different from arguing that a better world than ours would contain a multiplicity of culturally monistic societies that are entirely self-contained and mutually disengaged. But to abjure self-containment and mutual disengagement is to accept the truth of moderate cosmopolitanism. If that is

true, then a commitment to any conception of multiculturalism entails a commitment to that truth.

Finally, we come to liberal nationalism. If the modifier “liberal” really does apply to a particular species of nationalism, it could hardly be a nationalism that embraces the fictions of ancestral purity and the supposed need to recover that purity which moderate cosmopolitanism debunks. Whether “liberal nationalism” is an oxymoron is a more difficult question that I cannot address here. But a small point of scholarship is perhaps worth adding.

Waldron’s theory of cultural cosmopolitanism evolved from a critique of Kymlicka’s conception of access to a stable cultural framework as a primary good with which liberal theories of justice must reckon. But it has always seemed to me that Waldron’s use of “culture” simply bypasses Kymlicka’s argument altogether. Consider the definition of culture that Costa takes from Waldron: “The culture of a community is a way of doing things, particularly the things that are done *together*, throughout the whole course of human life: language, governance, religious rituals, rites of passage, family structures, material production and decoration, economy, science, warfare, and the sharing of a sense of history.” The idea of a culture here is tightly wedded to shared social practice: it is only by doing things together in broadly the same way, from warfare to family life and religious worship, that we come to possess a common culture. Kymlicka’s conception of a “societal culture” is quite different from this: a societal culture is “a set of institutions, which has historically developed over time in a given territory, covering both public and private life, with a common language, *which provides people with a wide range of choices about how to lead their lives.*”⁴ The emphasis here is on shared institutions that enable creative and discretionary variation in social practice — that is to say, differentiation in, for example, religious ritual, family structures, material production and decoration, and so on. Waldron’s and Kymlicka’s concepts overlap somewhat — most importantly, in matters of governance and language. But the fact that culture in Kymlicka’s sense provides an enabling framework within which both moderate and strong cosmopolitans can live and let live makes Waldron’s critique irrelevant to what Kymlicka has to say about justice and access to a stable primary culture. I strongly agree with Waldron that we do not need “a culture” in the sense he specifies. But that does not shown we do *not* need one in the sense that Kymlicka specifies.

Still, it is not exactly true that we are all cosmopolitans now. The durability of what I alluded to earlier as the more noxious forms of tribalism and nationalism attests to that fact. But there is no intellectually viable alternative to moderate cultural cosmopolitanism. And so whatever arguments can be said in its favor cannot help us if we are to take the political and educational measure of communitarianism, multiculturalism, or liberal nationalism.

1. Samuel Scheffler, *Boundaries and Allegiances* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 53.

2. See M. Victoria Costa, “Cultural Cosmopolitanism and Civic Education,” n7, in this volume.

3. These features of Alasdair MacIntyre's moral philosophy are especially conspicuous in *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1988).
4. Will Kymlicka, *Politics in the Vernacular: Nationalism, Multiculturalism and Citizenship* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 53 (emphasis added).